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ABSTRACT

This study focused upon whether there was a difference in the perception by peers of the target child in a classroom discipline situation after approval-focused desists (e.g., "June, I don't like children who talk without permission.") and task-focused desists (e.g., "Jane, You will not finish your reading if you continue to talk."). Thirty-two eighth-grade students were assigned to either an approval-focused or task-focused treatment group. Inferences were made about the personality traits of the target of the desists and the teacher administering the desists, when the amount of information available was severly limited. Both the target and the teacher of the approval-focused desists were rated as having less desirable personality traits than when task-focused desists were used. These findings supported the discounting principle of attribution theory. The hypotheses that children hearing the approval-focused desists would be more confident of their ratings than those hearing the task-focused desists were not supported. The author discusses limitations of the study. (Author/PC)

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THE EFFECTS OF TASK-FOCUSED AND APPROVAL-FOCUSED DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES

William K. Rice, Jr.

Discipline has been and continues to be an important concern within the classroom. The research on the types of discipline used has focused upon the behavior of the target child, the behavior of the observing peers, and the traits attributed to the disciplining teacher (Alden, 1960; Anderson & Brewer, 1946; Kounin, 1970; O'Leary & Becker, 1969; Shepherd & Bagley, 1970; Thomas, Becker & Armstrong, 1968). One important variable seems to have been overlooked in these studies, i.e., how is the target of the discipline viewed by his observing peers?

Since this study deals with qualities attributed by an observing child, the informational processing model of attribution theory was used. When making attribution based upon a single observation the discounting principle applies. "The role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present (Kelley, 1973 p. 113)." When the amount of information is minimal or from a single observation, the observer combines the present information with information from past observations of a similar nature and from this reasonable attributional inferences are made.

Anderson and Alexander (1971) suggest that negative

information is given greater weight than positive information. Jones and Davis (1965) indicate that negative behavior leads to greater attribution of personality-traits.

The present investigation focuses upon whether there is a difference in the perception by peers of the target child after approval-focused desists (e.g., "Jane, I don't like children who talk without permission.") and task-focused desists (e.g., "Jane, you will not finish your reading if you continue to talk.")? The negative content of approval-focused desists is directed toward the child while the negative content of task-focused desists is directed toward the activities of the child. Approval-focused desists result in more information of a negative quality about the child which in turn is given greater weight. Thus, a child disciplined by approval-focused desists should be viewed by observing peers as having more negative personality traits than a child disciplined by task-focused desists. Since the approval-focused desists provide more information, the traits should be inferred with a greater degree of confidence.

The teacher, who has little external cause to behave in any particular way, will be seen as revealing his/her personal qualities by the nature of the discipline technique employed. Previous research indicates that children

dislike or attribute less skill to teachers who are critical or use approval-focused desists (Alden, 1960; Jersild, 1940). Thus, a teacher using approval-focused desists should be rated as having less desirable personality-traits and the ratings should be held with more confidence than for a teacher who uses task-focused desists. Negative behavior leads to greater attribution of personality-traits. Specifically, it is hypothesized that: (a) children who hear a child disciplined with approval-focused desists will rate the child as having less desirable personality-traits than children who rate the personality-traits of the child disciplined by task-focused desists, (b) children who rate the personality-traits of the child disciplined with the approval-focused desists are more confident of their ratings than those who rate the personality-traits of a child disciplined by task-focused desists, (c) a teacher who is heard using approval-focused desists will be rated as having less desirable personality-traits, and (d) children hearing the teacher using the approval-focused desists will be more confident of their ratings than those hearing a teacher using task-focused desists.

Method

Thirty-two eighth grade boys and 32 eighth grade girls were randomly selected. Sixteen boys and 16 girls

were randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups, i.e., approval-focused and task-focused. Groups of 3-6 students were presented one of two tape recordings containing either approval-focused or task-focused desists. After listening to the tape recording, the subjects made trait inferences about the target of the desist and the teacher doing the desisting on a 5-point personality-trait scale and indicated their degree of confidence in each trait inference on a 3-point degree of confidence scale. The ratings on each scale were summed to give a total score on each of the four measures.

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with two factors, sex or rater and type of desist, was performed on the scores of the personality-trait ratings of the child (PTC), the confidence in the ratings of the child (CRC), the personality-trait ratings of the teacher (PTT), and the confidence in the ratings of the teacher (CRT). The MANOVA revealed a significant type of desist main effect ($F=10.49$, $df=4/57$, $p<.001$). The students who listened to the task-focused desists differed significantly in their responses on the measures from those who heard the approval-focused desists. Neither the sex of rater nor the Sex of rater x Type of desist interaction was significant ($p>.10$).

Further analyses on the means were performed in order to identify the dimension/s along which the groups differed. A discriminant analysis revealed that the PTC and PTT scores accounted for 97.6 percent of the total dispersion. The 2 (sex of rater) x 2 (type of desist) analysis of variance on the dependent variables, CRC and CRT, confirmed that there were no significant differences between the groups in their degree of confidence about their trait ratings.

A 2 (sex of rater) x 2 (type of desist) ANOVA, using the dependent variable PTC revealed that children who heard the approval-focused desists gave significantly lower trait-ratings to the target of the desists than those who heard the task-focused desists (F=14.79, df=1/60, p<.001). The ω^2 for the type of desist was .18. Thus, a moderate amount of the total variance was accounted for by the type of desist. The Fs for sex of rater and the Sex of rater x Type of desist interaction were not significant (p>.10).

A 2 (sex of rater) x 2 (type of desist) ANOVA, using the dependent variable PTT revealed that children who heard the approval-focused desists gave significantly lower trait-ratings to the teacher than those who heard the task-focused desists (F=21.72, df=1/60, p<.001). The ω^2 for the type of desist was .23. The Fs for the sex of

rater and the interaction of Sex of rater x Type of desist were not significant ($p>.10$).

The split-half reliabilities for the experimental groups on each of the four variables, PTC, CRC, PTT, and CRT, were: .90, .86, .89, and .73, respectively.

Discussion

The study was designed to determine the effect of task- and approval-focused desists. Inferences were made about the personality-traits of the target of the desists and the teacher administering the desists when the amount of information available was severely limited. Both the target and the teacher of the approval-focused desists were rated as having less desirable personality-traits than when task-focused desists were used. These findings support the discounting principle of attribution theory.

The negative rating of the teacher, using the approval-focused desists, is consistent with the finding of Alden (1960).

The hypotheses that children hearing the approval-focused desists would be more confident of their ratings than those hearing the task-focused desists were not supported. The fact that the negative quality of the approval-focused desists was directed at the child rather than the action apparently did not provide enough additional information about the child to significantly

affect the degree of confidence ratings. The interaction of the information present with information from the individual's past experience resulted in moderate confidence ratings. The variation in these confidence ratings appeared to be restricted to the individual's predispositions.

There are several limitations to this study: the desist techniques used were not randomly selected, they only represented two of a number that might have been chosen, and they were negative in quality. Also, only eighth grade students from small school districts were represented.

The study was purposely limited to the situation in which the observing peers had only a minimal amount of information. This allowed the investigation of the different desists to be made without the confounding of other variables that would normally be active in the system.

In order to provide more generalizable information about the desists, it would be necessary to investigate the effect of the desists when variables normally present are included, e.g., the type of misbehavior or the typical disciplinary techniques of the teacher. In these situations, the covariation principle applies. Consequently, different results might be obtained. As pointed out

by Kounin (1970), significant results in the laboratory setting frequently do not translate into significant effects in the classroom; therefore further research to determine the effects of task- and approval-focused desists under normal classroom conditions is indicated. The present research reveals that blocking on sex can be eliminated; however providing knowledge about both the teacher and the target of the desists would be important variables to include.

Nevertheless, as a laboratory finding, the type of desist does make a difference in how the child and the teacher are viewed. Since the self-concept of an individual is often influenced by how others view him (Mead, 1934), use of approval-focused desists could, over a period of time, have a detrimental psychological effect upon the child. For these reasons, it is suggested that task-focused desists should be substituted for approval-focused desists of a negative quality.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Experimental Groups on the Dependent Variables: Personality-Traits of the Child, Confidence in the Ratings of the Child, Personality-Traits of the Teacher, and Confidence in the Ratings of the Teacher

Dependent Measure	Group			
	Approval-Focused		Task-Focused	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Personality-Traits of the Child				
M	53.25	49.81	66.63	61.13
SD	14.76	13.18	10.97	12.15
Confidence in Ratings of the Child				
M	65.38	63.00	60.06	62.88
SD	11.26	8.08	7.71	9.86
Personality-Traits of the Teacher				
M	42.19	49.38	61.56	58.63
SD	9.83	14.25	13.01	11.59
Confidence in Ratings of the Teacher				
M	49.31	46.88	50.75	48.63
SD	7.50	6.40	6.32	8.00

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